

## **Intercultural learning of hosting families**

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### **Abstract:**

During the spring of 2011, 26 Italian host families related to two big organizations (Intercultura/AFS Italy and Fondazione Don Gnocchi) were interviewed through semi-structured recorded interviews. The main goal of the research was to understand whether families that had hosted a foreign student/person in their home would indicate the presence of intercultural learning in their discourse. Despite the fact that all of these hosting experiences were successful ones in traditional terms, the main finding of the research is that hosting somebody from one month to one year remains a “sentimental” experience in the memory of these families. That is, families describe the hosting experience in terms of positive and negative emotions and not in terms of the acquisition of knowledge or the development of skills. Results of content analysis of the families’ narratives (parents and children) from both groups of families revealed a mostly ethnocentric experience (Denial, Defense, and/or Minimization). While the Don Gnocchi families did make reference to specific cultural differences that had been presented during their orientation, the AFS families did not refer to cultural differences in any realm of the homestay, including in those rare cases when conflict was reported. Based on these data, there was no evidence of intercultural learning (as defined here) in either group of host families. Further discussion among researchers and practitioners about the need of intentional educational efforts for families is suggested.

### **1. Introduction**

Professionals in the field of exchange education have known for a long time the challenges of students and host families in making this experience a mutually satisfactory one. Most of the research has focused on the adaptation of students (Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Paige, 1993; Ward, Bohner and Furnham, 2001; Martin & Harrell, 2004), their level of intercultural learning (AFS Impact study, Hansel 1986; Georgetown Consortium research study (Vande Berg et al, 2004; Vande Berg & Paige, 2009; Maximizing Study Abroad research study (Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004); their improvement of intercultural sensitivity over the sojourn span (Hammer, 2006), their global engagement as a result of the intercultural experience (SAGE -Study Abroad for Global

Engagement- research study (Paige & Fry, 2008); AFS Long term impact study, Hansel and Chen 2008).

However, the other side of the exchange, at least for most high school level exchanges, is the homestay family. This research has been presented on the occasion of the Second Forum on Intercultural Learning and Exchange, October 26-29 2011, cosponsored by Fondazione Intercultura and IDR Institute, called “The other side of exchange: intercultural learning through hosting”.

The little research around homestay families has mainly tackled the issues of their role in making the exchange experience a success (Grove, 1984) or around psychological dynamics occurring in the families (Weidemann & Blueml, 2007). Other research has only tangentially touched the families as part of the equation (Hammer, 2006) together with other pivotal subjects such as schools, teachers and peers.

None of this research has focused on the intercultural learning of families, despite the fact that it is one of the main motivations reported for accepting a foreign person into one’s own home, both in this research and as reported in other ones (Grove, 1984; Weidemann & Blueml, 2007).

For this reason, **this research has exclusively focused on** 1) the family members’ cultural self-awareness, 2) the extent to which they were able to understand the ‘guest’ culture, 3) the capacity to transfer learnt intercultural knowledge and skills into their professional and every day life, and 4) the perceived need to share issues and the complexity of the experience with other families undergoing the same process.

## 2. Methodology

The research follows a constructivist qualitative methodology. The form of a constructivist enquiry entails: natural setting, as reality cannot be understood in isolation of its context (i.e. the hosting families homes); some a priori knowledge (literature, prior grounded theory such as the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, personal experience, prior ethnography) in order to determine foreshadowed questions, which guide the data collection.

The research process develops according to an emergent design that comes from the research experience rather than being totally developed a priori (co-construction of the process). This evolving design requires a specific method for identifying potential data sources.

Purposive sampling, not representative (random sampling), is needed to achieve the maximum variation of multiple perspectives in an emergent inquiry. In this research, after the test interview and the length and number of homestays as general criteria, some characteristics have been outlined for the choice of the sample families, prior consultation with the exchange organizations.

Human perception is the primary data gathering instrument in constructivist research. Therefore trained interviewers were sent to conduct the semi-structured interviews on site.

Qualitative methods (eg. in depth interviewing, observing, recording) are preferred in formal constructivist data collections because they reflect the co-construction of meaning between researcher and experiencing subject. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Then, inductive data analysis is used to organize raw units of information into subsuming categories, assuring that the findings are grounded in the context of the inquiry.

The rigor standards for constructivist research quality are composed of *trustworthiness* – the quality of the research product-analogous to the positivist standards of validity and reliability and demonstrates truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality; and *authenticity* – the quality of the inquiry process- which includes demonstrations of equal power, consciousness raising, appreciation of other’s construction. It is the interactive result of the research process.

## 2.1 Sample

Two groups were considered for interviews for a total of 34 adults (17 females and 17 males). The first (16 families) was a group of families who had hosted within the Intercultura AFS program. Criteria for selection of families were: 1) hospitality between 2005 and 2010- from 3 months to 1 one year; 2) families hosting while their son/daughter was abroad on a similar program; 3) families of former AFS exchange students with all of their children present during hospitality; 4) families with children; 5) couples with no children.

The second group (10 families) was a group of families who had hosted within the Fondazione Don Gnocchi program. The international department of this foundation attends to projects which have been sponsored in Africa (Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Ruanda), Latina America (Equador) and Eastern Europe (Bosnia, Albania). The “exchange program” considered here is a medical aid experience started in 2003. It is open to employees and consultants of the Don Gnocchi foundation who want to host a person, from children to young adults, from Zimbabwe. The guests are coming from one to three months to Italy where they have a heart surgery, then stay for recovery “at home”, by these temporary families. Families were selected according to the following criteria: 1) hospitality between 2005 and 2010- from 1 to 3 months; 2) families with children; 3) couples with no children.

11 children above 13 years old were interviewed (5 females, 6 males). All families came from region Lombardia, whose main city is Milan. Majority of adult respondents had a high school (9) or laurea degree (12) educational level. Families to be interviewed were chosen by the volunteers on the basis of their availability, proximity and previous personal contact.

## 2.2 Rationale for the groups' choice

Literature and experience on students' showed that one of the main reasons for AFS hosting families was getting to know another culture, while the narrative of the Don Gnocchi families was solidarity. Intuitively, given the expressed primary motivation, one would expect a more intentional focus on culture for the AFS families and less so for the Don Gnocchi Foundation (DGF) families.

In the design of the sample, we decided that the juxtaposition of these two groups was useful for the researchers in order to make comparison of host families in two different contexts. Both groups are exposed to a different culture in their homes for a significant amount of time, in a similar condition where they have a role of surrogate parents, where there often are other children present, their own, where they have a role of guidance and care. However, they differ in the implicit goal of the homestay and in the orientations they receive.

## 2.3 The DMIS

Underlying the research questions is the theory of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) by Milton J. Bennett (1984, 1993, 2004). The goal was to understand the ability of people to construe the hosting event as a chance for intercultural learning.

According to the DMIS, the inability to experience cultural difference is defined as “ethnocentric”, as an individual is only capable of construing the experience of one's own culture. In this mode, cultural differences don't exist (Denial), are a threat (Defense/Reversal) or exist only superficially (Minimization). As people develop a worldview able to support an intercultural experience, they become “ethnorelative”. They are able to recognize the value of difference in other cultures (Acceptance), to change their behavior and their perspective in order to adjust to a different culture (Adaptation), to incorporate a multicultural perspective into their identity (Integration).

Content analysis of statements about cultural difference can reveal the “predominant experience of difference” for an interviewee, which is stated in terms of one of the stages or positions along the continuum from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. The predominant experience of difference is not necessarily a respondent’s exclusive experience of difference, so the researcher looks for the preponderance of particular kinds of statements. In addition, there may be “trailing issues,” which are ethnocentric experiences that may color later, more ethnorelative experiences. The most common trailing issue is that of Reversal, in which there is a reversal of the “us/them” polarization wherein “them” become better than “us.”

## 2.4 Areas of investigation

Questions aimed at gathering information on four areas: 1) resource information; general attitude towards cultural difference; motivation; cultural self-awareness; 2) ability to observe critical incidents; styles of coping with cultural misunderstandings; 3) ability to frame events during the exchange in cultural terms; 4) transferability of intercultural learning; willingness and ability to share the experience; reflection of the experience on global citizenship.

## 3. Outcomes

**3.1 The problem with talking about culture.** All interviewees read the interviewees a given definition of subjective culture, so that they could respond to questions dealing with culture by having a common idea in mind.

The definition was apparently heard, but was in fact never really taken into account in the responses. The word culture has turned out to be somewhat problematic. Respondents were avoiding the word for the most part or they were stating it as a problem. In some cases it was so rejected that people said “...we’ve had the luck to have *him* in the house...he has never manifested symptoms of his culture.” (DGF) “...with N. we didn’t even have the the problem of religion, since she was catholic while the state religion in her country is buddhism” (AFS).

All but one defined him/her self as monocultural (Italian, in most cases they have always lived in the same area they live at the time of the interview).

The general response to the question about what observations they were able to make about one’s own culture or other people’s culture was that “it was not an issue” (DGF and AFS). It is therefore interesting to note that while the stated attitude towards cultural difference is, for the majority of interviewed people, a “matter of curiosity,” at the same time it is difficult for them to talk about it. Particularly when asked about cultural misunderstanding that might have led to tension or resentment while hosting, all interviewees, of both groups, responded that no such a thing ever occurred during their hospitality. Both groups reported that they were not able to see any pattern in the way their guests tried to solve problems and/or conflicts. The AFS group did not report any critical incident, that is to say a practical example that might illustrate a cultural pattern, or even a linguistic misunderstanding. The DGF group consistently reported two major observations about the cultural patterns of their guests: the first is the attention to time as experienced in Africa, the second is the attention to the behaviors related to the use of water in the house. Apparently these are two cultural generalizations that people remembered from a DGF orientation program.

### 3.2 Sources of information

Families were asked what sources of information they chose, if any, about the guest's national culture. The vast majority of people of the AFS group mentioned internet research. The most searched information was about geography, history, politics and food (ways of cooking).

The DGF group is provided with a basic vocabulary booklet in English, Italian and a local language. Almost all interviewees mentioned a two hours briefing with the international office director and other medical doctors particularly involved in the program who have had "a personal experience" of Africa.

Some respondents in the AFS group report having attended a general meeting in which all of the programs are presented, included the hosting one. However, none of the respondents report having received information about culture or cultural differences.

### 3.3 The lens of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

All the interviews were read and eventually processed through the lens of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) by Milton J. Bennett (1984, 1993, 2004). It provided a conceptual grid to categorize expressions people used to talk about cultural difference. The predominant worldview of both groups is ethnocentrism, with few exceptions of people whose worldview is ethnorelativist with some trailing issues in ethnocentrism, always having to do with a reversed polarization of the us/them dualism (they are better than us), i.e. "*...in a certain way we've tried to preserve these differences...our preoccupation was not to ruin him and so we wanted to preserve those things we thought were healthy values that we were risking to contaminate...now that he's back to his country we can say he's the usual G., a simple guy...it was a relief for us because we had the same fear...in this somewhat dissolute world of kids with the cell phone of the decadent West*" (AFS).

On the same note of reversal, here are some more examples from both groups:

*"We had been told that they liked to eat pizza and L.. "obviously" did not like it. I must say that, talking about culture, I had some expectations related to his needs which in fact he never manifested. He was an example of simplicity. He was happy with nothing...L. when was coming home did not want to eat chips but fruit, for sure better habits than our children"* (DGF)

*"he was very cordial..., perhaps more cordial than people here...yes a kind of education that we don't have here sometimes"* (AFS)

Nevertheless the most commonly displayed worldview was one that aimed at minimizing differences

*"...a girl that is coming from a very Westernized country, has more or less the same defects of our children...the shower that was never ending..."* (AFS)

*"I'm an antiracist by definition, meaning that I don't see differences, for me, we all are human beings..."* (DGF)

### 3.4 The cultural codes: between judgment and attribution

Interviewees were asked through several questions whether they were able to observe cultural codes through which their guest had been raised. Again, most of the respondents from DGF were framing their observations and examples through the information they had been briefed with, as they were repeated by almost everybody in the same fashion. It is not the case of AFS respondents who for the most part were attributing different behaviors to personality traits.

As observed in the Weidemann and Blüml study (2007) “cultural attributions are mostly made in a very stereotypical and undifferentiated way” (p.13). For instance,

*“We noticed his relationship with things, he put things into the drawers all very tidily but all together [clean and dirty clothes, N.O.T.] and think that I try to inculcate to my daughter the Anglo-Saxon concept of order with no success and this guy arrives all tidy...from a cultural viewpoint this aspect discombobulated us. 1-0 for Zimbabwe against UK for order” (DGF, Italian mother with no direct experience of British culture).*

It is even more evident for the following interviewee, for whom his Japanese student was exactly like his other children, except when he was asked to make observations about cultural patterns. A mix of idealism, stereotype and attribution all of a sudden makes this student different from other teenagers because of her role as a cultural ambassador. *“...this kind of youth coming from Japan, which is our only experience, is a peculiar form of youth, very related to the cult of tradition on the parents’ side, for the mother for instance, as much as we know, was trying to give her piano lessons, singing, while she was one of those who wanted to go to karaoke...from a practical viewpoint, her culture, I mean what she has tried to transfer is not what we think is “the best”. I don’t want to seem racist, but the idea is karaoke, Burgy or Mc Donald (fast food), which is a very Western thing, no? we already are full of these things, so [she was] transferring from Japan to Italy the same level.” (AFS)*

The apparent inconsistency between claiming commonality and stereotyping cultural differences is understandable through the DMIS, when a person with a predominant view in Minimization is at times struggling with the desire to suppress cultural difference and to simultaneously make generalizations from limited experience which end up as judgments, sometimes prejudice, like in these cases:

*“C. was a stranger, she has never wanted to be part of the family...among other experiences this has been particularly negative, since she has never, despite all the efforts to make her feel part of the family, wanted to be with us...she had a clear and strong idea to be a “guest” as if she were paying...it was only for a month she luckily she has left. We have never wanted to host any more Americans.” (AFS)*

*“the MD told me that they are this way. He was telling me about examples of complete inefficiency dictated by the absolute lack of use of the brain. If they are told to move a sheet of paper, they don’t do it: even if it is logical, they don’t use logic.” (DGF)*

### **3.5 Sharing the experience**

The need to share the common experience with other families is expressed by most interviewees of both groups. They report it is an experience that is hard to explain to friends, acquaintances and colleagues, together with their motivation and eventual problems.

*“No I didn’t talk to anybody. I think it would have been useful to share it, but not all the people are able to share their feelings during such an experience. I mean, you have to find the right people that either think like you or that can share this interest or pleasure or interest of yours.” (daughter, AFS)*

In the case of the DGF group, most interviewees have reported feeling scrutinized when going around with a black boy or girl, who is not your child, but is treated as such.

*“...I must say that everybody looks at you, they appreciate you and admire you, but I don’t think they know exactly what kind of an experience we have lived” (DGF)*

For both groups, but particularly in the DGF group, there were discoveries of deep value differences, such as those associated with the poverty divide. In those cases, the need to share becomes greater as there is a greater sense of loss when the child or student leaves.

*“there should be more space for confrontation; my children, when E. was with us, came to realize the value of water or of an apple, but after two months the water is still running. The person leaves a memory, but the faucet stays open, this is the bad side of this experience” (DGF)*

### **3.6 Hosting brothers and sisters**

The experience of hospitality for younger hosting family members has been similar to the one reported by parents, that is to say one of dealing with difference through the strategy of minimization.

*“...when he started to speak Italian...he was different, it was a different thing, before he was a little like a friend, then he was almost like a brother” (AFS)*

*“...may be it’s a bad thing to say, but when we started to talk a little less between ourselves, when we started to have a less intense relationship, there I understood that our brotherhood was consolidated, that he had become a normal presence in our home” (AFS)*

*“...we started to collaborate together, like two real sisters, just few weeks after her arrival” (AFS)*

### **3.7 Capacity to transfer learnt lesson to professional or personal areas**

The general feeling of human enrichment has led most of the people “to feel more part of the global world” (DGF) or “citizens of the world” (AFS) but in both cases with the justification that “we are not a nation, but in the end all human beings are equal, though differences exist. In other words it is good that each one has one’s own characteristics, but one should share them, not fight them, with no fear.” (son, AFS)

The professional input of the intercultural experience has been considered more by members of the DGF group, perhaps given that a lot of them are health professionals.

*“From the professional viewpoint I often have foreign patients, so I’ve had an opportunity to reflect, thanks to this experience on the way people experience differently the concept of time, gesturing...” (DGF)*

For the AFS group instead it has been considered more by the hosting siblings, who, in some cases, have found in the experience a chance to look for vocational inspiration such as in the case of this AFS host:

*“I’ve reinforced my idea of becoming an interpreter, because I liked the experience in Germany [after having been invited back to her house] and I’ve seen that by coming here she has learnt Italian well and I’ve had the idea of studying languages, particularly German...”*

For most parents it has been a formative experience for their own children as they have had the need to share their belongings and space with somebody else. In the case of DGF respondents, an additional factor was because they had the chance to talk with their children about values such as the parsimonious use of water or food that the African guests were showing.

Members of both groups reported having had a very positive experience. They remember the separation with emotion, as well as the enthusiasm of the experience of sharing.

## 4. Emergent themes

### 4.1 Personality traits or cultural patterns?

Generally speaking, when the predominant worldview is one of ethnocentrism, specific cultural information is used to lock other people's behavior into stereotypes. In other cases, actual cultural behavior is interpreted in the personality sphere.

In the following situation, the siblings attribute a culturally explainable behavior to personality, while their parents speak of the same behavior initially in stereotypical terms, then as "family style," still missing the cultural pattern of "use of space."

*"[It was a matter of personality]...when she had something she was always going to her bedroom with the mp3" (AFS, daughters)*

*"we have a more precise timetable during the day, for work, for eating, while Germans go, they eat when they want...they don't have a precise time...we are more Germans than they are... she was living all the time in her bedroom, may be because she had four brothers...everybody minds his/her own business, unlike us who eat together, set the table...it was because of her family, we've seen later in her house that everybody there behaves that way, each of them in their own room, but who knows if everybody does that over there" (AFS parents)*

### 4.2 Assimilation or intercultural learning?

For the AFS group more than the DGF group, the implicit goal of their hosting seemed to be assimilation; that is, to immerse their student into the life of the family and the country. In some cases there was an explicit effort, on the part of some families, to make their guests understand and assimilate a "better" way of being in the world. This is traceable to an ethnocentric approach to cultural difference. At least in Italy, by trying to behave like a good parent, there is of course a transmission of values and ideals. While the DGF group was less inclined toward assimilation (perhaps because of lack of time), they were similar to the AFS group in not focusing on intercultural learning during the exchange.

For example:

*"...a Chinese person cannot afford to say no, to smile, to express emotions. This is because of education, culture, specific ethnicity. All of this really struck us. We have discovered that after she has gone back to her country, her mentality went back the way it was." (AFS)*

*" she took our habits after a week, for me it was like having another daughter, an Italian, I did not think she was a German girl" (AFS)*

In other words, at best, the result of this experience for most families, I would say for all the interviewed families is one of Minimization, where by making the guest become part of an enlarged family, all differences are erased. It is interesting to recall Hammer's research (2006) whose major outcome was that AFS students' result of the exchange experience was one of highlighted humanity, of opening up to a wider world which was not threatening anymore, but similar to theirs. If the predominant outcome is the same for students and families, it is hard to say whether it is a causality issue or a systemic condition. What seems to be implied in the responses from interviewees is that it is expected that the student or guest makes the effort to "integrate", where they assume by this word assimilation. The other interesting finding is the perception, for many interviewees of "success" of one's own experience of hospitality because of higher cultural similarity with the culture of the guest.



*“...when we compared notes with other hosting families we realized differences. For instance those who were hosting Chinese students...for them it was frustrating, because they didn't have the same ways to relate to each other, it was complicated, so there you feel that cultural difference exists. For us, we perceived culture somewhat, but there were similar ways of communication, because culture was similar.” (AFS)*

### **4.3 The sentimental experience**

In both groups, by recalling the experience, people became very emotional. Even parents and children who stated, at the end of the interview, they did not learn anything from a cultural viewpoint, reported a sentiment of attachment and love for the person they have hosted.

*“Now it is as if we have a daughter, perhaps it is a big word, who lives in Japan..” (AFS)*

*“...when I see children of color now, they all look like L. and that helps me to be more understanding.” (DGF)*

The experience of love is the aspect of the research that the two considered groups share the most. A point of difference is the belief system in the background: in the DGF group, the experience was always associated to Christian values, where by offering solidarity, they received love. In the AFS group, in only one case were religious values declared as leading principles.

## **5. Conclusions**

The research has underlined a problem of our internet era: without a scaffolding people don't know where to put information about a culture randomly gathered through research engines. Thus looking for general information on the web does not consist of usable information for most of the people.

The lack of an intercultural framework does not allow AFS host families to frame events as cultural ones, therefore any communication event is almost exclusively an interpersonal issue. The use of the comparison group has allowed us to put this outcome in perspective. Despite the fact that DGF respondents also have a predominant experience of ethnocentrism, they are able to attribute some observations of everyday behavior to the cultural differences they were prepared for.

The content analysis shows that almost all respondents, of both groups, have an ethnocentric worldview as described by Milton Bennett's DMIS. People with a predominant experience of Defense are split between the two forms of polarization – we are better/superior/more fortunate than they are; and they are better/simpler/ knowledgeable about real values of life than we are (Reversal). A good number of statements can be placed in Minimization and the few respondents who organize their experience in Acceptance terms also indicate strong trailing issues in ethnocentrism.

The nature of qualitative research is to open a topic and to identify issues for further exploration. This study was limited by the focus on only Italian families in a particular regional area. Further investigation could extend these research questions to a larger sample, both in Italy and abroad. For instance, it would be interesting to know if the difficulty in describing subjective culture is a kind of “national cultural problem”, that is to say that Italians are not inclined to think about culture in these terms. While it is true that for many Italians the word culture tends to coincide with objective culture (artifacts, art and institutions), it is hard to think that almost all respondents, after having heard the given definition, could not remember any significant moment they could attribute to a potential cultural characteristic as opposed to a personality trait. It also would be interesting to see if non-Italian families were more comfortable sharing their experience and thus better resources in

recruiting other hosts. Finally, at a societal level it would be important to know in what ways these kinds of programs impact the raising of consciousness about global citizenship, personal commitment, and social responsibility.

The outcomes of this research show that there is a potential window for adult intercultural education. Opening one's own home to a stranger is an act of faith showing a willingness to help, but also to share and learn. As demonstrated in the last twenty years of pedagogical and neuroscience literature, love and emotions are the perfect basis for a long lasting learning experience, both for young and adult subjects (Contini, 1992, Le Doux, 1996, Pert, 1997). Yet love by itself, if not paired by an educational and learning effort, leaves the experience at a sentimental stage. The highly activated emotional state allows the possibility to learn if followed by adequate cognitive support, such as becoming able to name emotions and observations, intentionally creating categories or making links to already construed frames. The beauty of the hosting experience is that it might create learning about how to deal with difference that is transferrable. Being able to intentionally shift perspective and adapt to a different cultural context requires cultural self-awareness and observational skills. Taking this competence into the working environment, into school, and into the societal context creates leadership. By raising the overall sensitivity around the value of diversity in society we become contributors of a more peaceful and thriving environment.

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